



ATC Conservation and Trail Management Policy Accessibility

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The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), a §501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works closely with Appalachian Trail volunteer maintaining clubs (“Clubs”) and other public and private partners to ensure the protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and experiential resources of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (known as ANST, A.T., or “the Trail”). Approximately fifty federal, state, or other public agencies have authority or jurisdiction over lands and resources within the protected A.T. corridor. ATC has a central management role by virtue of its Cooperative Agreement with the USDI National Park Service and its close working partnership with the USDA Forest Service and other agencies.

ATC's Trail management and conservation policies are meant to provide guidance for (a) dissemination to the public; (b) use and implementation by the ATC and the Clubs; and (c) recommendations for land-managing and other agencies. It is the agencies who work within their defined procedures to propose, administer, and enforce public policy. ATC policies are recommendations developed to support appropriate, coordinated Trail-wide management.

Overview

Accessibility is a permanent part of the list of design considerations for trails and facilities. Awareness of access issues in the Trail community has increased in recent years, fostered by legislation and societal realities. As the population ages and as interest in nature, wildlife, and physical exercise continues to be strong, public demand for accessible opportunities along the Appalachian Trail continues to grow.

There is a desire among Trail partners to provide opportunities for persons with disabilities to use the Appalachian Trail where appropriate and feasible. However, a pedestrian trail that meets accessibility guidelines is a highly designed path, generally with imported surfacing and a gentle slope. It avoids both man-made and natural obstacles. Accessible trails require more involved construction and maintenance techniques and resources. The outdoor community has wrestled with the challenge of increasing recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities on public lands while at the same time ensuring that such opportunities do not alter the settings of these recreational experiences.

Federal laws relating to accessibility include the [Architectural Barriers Act](#) (1968) and the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (1990). National policy guidance on integrating accessibility with outdoor recreation management on public lands, including the Appalachian Trail, resides with the U.S. Access Board. In the 1990s, the board convened a group of outdoor recreation stakeholders, including ATC, to develop new guidelines for accessibility on trails and outdoor facilities. While the



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work of that group has been completed, the resulting guidelines have not yet been adopted.

In 2006, after a long public process, the USFS developed a set of guidelines to be utilized on all USFS lands to provide direction and tools for land managers to address increasing requests and inquiries regarding opportunities for persons with disabilities on national forest lands. The USFS Trail Accessibility Guidelines ([FSTAG](#)) and the Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines ([FSORAG](#)) define how and when accessibility along trails and at facilities on U.S. Forest Service lands will be considered. Both FSTAG and FSORAG are nearly identical to the Access Board's draft guidelines. *Although FSTAG and FSORAG are specific to USFS lands, they are considered to be the best standard to utilize in complying with federal accessibility laws, and, until the Access Board releases its final guidelines, should be used on all Appalachian Trail lands regardless of ownership.*

Where opportunities have permitted, ATC has worked with local Trail clubs and its agency partners to develop a number of accessible Trail segments. Examples include the one-mile-long crossing of the Pochuck wetland in New Jersey, a 1.1-mile loop trail in Falls Village, Connecticut, an accessible trail section at Thundering Falls, Vermont and a section of the Trail with scenic vistas on the Osborne Farm in Tennessee. Accessible Trail sections are being constructed in New York at Bear Mountain.

ATC policy will change as federal guidelines and requirements are adopted. In the interim, ATC acknowledges that use of FSTAG and FSORAG are required on all national forest system lands crossed by the Trail and urges the use of FSTAG and FSORAG or equivalent universal designs for project-planning on all jurisdictions. ATC has developed drawings and guidelines for constructing accessible shelters, tent platforms, and privies that meet FSORAG requirements.

ATC, with NPS funds, has prepared a manual entitled *Increasing Opportunities for Access on the Appalachian Trail: A Design Guide* to aid Trail clubs and agencies with universal access issues.

Policy

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy supports the concept of accessibility in outdoor environments, provided that modifications are not made that would detract from the primitive recreational environment or experience. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy and its federal land-managing agency partners consider wheelchairs, prostheses, and other devices needed by individuals whose disabilities may require such devices for the purposes of mobility, as part of those persons and not as mechanized or motorized vehicles or means of transport. Sections of the Appalachian Trail that are accessible to varying degrees for people with disabilities, such as those sections that coincide with the Virginia Creeper Trail and C&O Canal Towpath, may provide opportunities for full access and should be examined for such purposes on a case-by-case basis. However, the Appalachian Trail should not be altered, and construction of facilities out of character



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with the primitive recreational purpose of the Trail should be prohibited, unless such alterations can be made without changing the fundamental character of the backcountry recreational experience provided by the Trail.

For questions related to this policy please contact the Appalachian Trail Conservancy at www.appalachiantrail.org, or P.O. Box 807, Harpers Ferry, WV, 25425-807.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy's mission is to protect, manage, and advocate for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail.